

Edogawa University Visiting Professor Programme : Evaluation of Effectiveness

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From October – December 2012, I have been participating in a new “visiting professor” programme at Edogawa University. This report will discuss the primary goals of this programme as well as some of the initial challenges faced. It will also analyse how the programme was implemented, its effectiveness and give some suggestions on how the programme can be best utilised in the future.

Overview of programme:

The programme currently consists of one native speaker English Language Educator from Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand seconded to “live and work” at Edogawa University, Japan for a period of three months. Massey University was chosen to provide the educator due to the long-standing relationship between the two campuses. As I have been teaching and coordinating short course programmes for Edogawa University students for the past five years, I was delighted to be asked to participate in this flagship programme. I was encouraged by the calibre and foresight of the programme and the potential impact of the programme on the student’s language acquisition.

Educational and cross cultural aims

The primary goal of the programme was to create an international presence on campus. It was hoped that this would encourage students to recognise the value of English language education and remove some of the confidence barriers as well, which have prevented cross cultural communication in the past. I saw my role consisting of three interconnected functions: to interact, to elicit and to encourage.

Interact:

Many of the students would have had limited encounters with a foreign native speakers of English. Although the students have the necessary language to communicate, it is mostly theoretical and would not have been applied to everyday situation where authentic communication is required. This meant that even basic interactions could be fraught with problems when the students are suddenly faced with encounters which would trigger severe Communication Anxiety. This could result in an inability to converse and may damage the student’s confidence.

My constant presence on campus would be designed to normalise the idea of cross cultural communication in English until it was routine to speak with a “foreigner”. This would reduce anxiety and allow repeated opportunities for the students to attempt English communication until they had a successful, stress-free conversation.

Elicit:

Regardless of the student’s ability, it was the intention of the programme to create opportunities to elicit the language familiar to the students and to use this as a foundation for further study. By speaking about familiar topics in an short interview structure (as decided by the university) and follow-

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ing the same weekly routine, the students would slowly become more comfortable conversing in basic English. I could then use this opportunity to extend and challenge the students by eliciting more complex vocabulary, questions forms and grammatical structures.

I was also asked to give daily “talks” on a range of everyday topics. These talks were particularly relevant to the interests of the students such as travel around Asia, Business Communication, Media Studies and Cultural Studies. It was hoped that exposure to the wider world would broaden the students horizons, encourage independent thinking and perhaps even inspire them to further their education abroad.

Encourage:

As this was a short term programme, I particularly wanted to develop autonomous learning among the students after I left. I hoped that by demonstrating the practical use of English, the students would be invigorated to apply themselves to their study. Furthermore, I wanted to combat any preconceptions they had about being incapable of speaking English. I hoped that by providing a supportive environment, they would see that they had a great capacity for communication and that this would increase their confidence and encourage them to continue their studies.

Preliminary findings:

Initially, the students encountered were extremely shy and reticent both around campus and in a classroom setting. Spontaneous communication was rare and attempts to communicate were met with resistance, the “freeze effect” or avoidance. Although some students were genuinely excited about English education, like many students in Japan, the majority were suffering from the effects of Communication Anxiety. The students were also unused to the New Zealand style of Eng-

lish education which requires constant interaction and verbal feedback between teachers and students. This put added pressure onto classroom interactions. Although this could be disheartening at times, for teachers and students, it was consistent with expectations held before my arrival.

Analysis of the effectiveness of the programme:

I was very pleased and encouraged to see a noticeable improvement over the course of the programme. The results challenged my expectations of what a short term programme of this nature could achieve.

Within the first two months, students began regularly engaging in spontaneous conversation with me at the bus stop or around the campus. Conversation was limited by the student’s language ability but definite attempts to communicate were being made. Furthermore, students who were not directly participating in my classes also began to interact with me. This was very reassuring, as previous attempts had been unsuccessful.

I believe that this demonstrates the value of having a “native speaker” on campus in order to normalise English communication. Once my daily presence around campus was expected, the students were less reluctant to approach me and practice their English. By the end of the three months, students were regularly communicating with me in English. This was occurring both on campus, and when they saw me in the wider community. Having gained this confidence, I believe that it will serve the student well in their future interactions with other foreigners.

The interview element of programme also yielded results.

The students who participated in the programme have grown increasingly confident in communicating in English over the past three months. I have heard significant improvements, especially in their

fluency and their conversations are more authentic, with less hesitation and increased student participation. This fulfils one of the primary goals of the programme.

Even the students who had initially told me that the process would be “impossible” for them began to converse and interact with me in English. I feel that this was due to the one on one environment the university provided, where the students were free to discuss topics of personal interest, make mistakes and try out their English without worrying about judgement from their peers.

The most encouraging by-product of this process was that some of the students started to visit in their own free time not just in the time slot that had been allocated to them. This suggested to me that they were beginning to enjoy their English study which is a crucial step in retaining the motivation to continue with language learning.

The following is a case study which I believe both epitomises the prevalent attitude of the Japanese students I encountered and illustrates the benefit of the programme.

Case Study A:

Student A was extremely resistant to English study. When asked to contribute to conversation, his most common reply in Japanese was “it’s impossible”. He refused to participate in English classes and initially often missed scheduled interviews. Although outwardly he appeared extroverted, his anxiety when faced with communication in English was evident. As a result of this, his studies had suffered and his language level could be classed as false beginner/beginner, well below other students of his peer group. His ability to learn language was not in question but his mind-set, which is unfortunately prevalent among Japanese students of “I can’t do it” greatly affected his ability to converse.

Starting with direct translations of his mother

tongue, my goal was to demonstrate that he was just as capable of communicating as the other students. My focus was not on teaching new material, rather triggering the grammatical structures he already knew and creating meaningful correspondence.

I worked with this student and many others intensively over a period of three months. As his communication confidence improved, he eventually began to come to see me in his time (outside of the scheduled meeting). He also began to bring his classmates and was even attempting to translate for them. To my surprise and his, although his verbal output was low, he had a real strength in listening comprehension.

Focusing on his strengths, I gave him more listening activities which he could complete and this boosted his confidence a great deal. He is now able to communicate, using very basic structures. Although his base level has not improved significantly, his attitude towards English language learning has. I expect, now that this barrier is removed, he will continue to make progress. He and many of the other students who participated in this no longer say “English is impossible” which I believe fulfils the aims, if not the spirit of this programme.

Future improvements:

On the whole, I feel that the programme was very successful in its initial goals. The time I spent here was beneficial to the students and gave me a good insight into the role future such programmes could play in increasing the confidence and ability of Japanese English language students. Being a flagship programme, it was not without its challenges as well. The following are some potential areas of improvement.

1. Extend the length of the programme

I would suggest a period of between four-six months to optimise the effectiveness of the programme. The first two months con-

sisted of an adjustment period for the foreign teacher, the university staff and the students. By the start of the third month, the systems and routines were established and real progress was being made. The end of the third month the focus was on bringing the course to its conclusion. It seemed to me then, as a participant, that the programme was drawing to an end just as it was beginning to have real effect.

2. Dedicated classes taught by the native speaker teacher and open to all students.

Scheduling is always incredibly difficult in a large institution. Currently, in order to have classes taught by the visiting teaching, permanent staff have had to handover classes, making it difficult to get through their own curriculum. I suggest that in order to make further use of the visiting professor's time and resources, voluntary classes open to all students (regardless of departments) who wish to participate are held. This would widen the presence of the visiting professor on campus and provide motivated students with an opportunity for further practice. The classes would need to be on a sign up basis (possibly internet based) with a guaranteed attendance of at least six students to ensure viability.

3. Continuation of interview structure.

Due to its success, I recommend that the interview structure be continued in the same format. I would suggest though that the short talks could be linked in more fully to the interview topic for that week. This would reinforce the relevancy and cohesion of both.

Conclusion:

One of the things that impressed me most about this programme was its forward thinking. In order for students to make real improvements and become proficient communicators, it is my opinion that the current status quo of language education in Japan is not always enough. In my view, there is a disparity between the length of time a student spends in English language education in Japan and the language output which that student is capable of.

Universities, like Edogawa, who recognise the need create the best possible learning environment for their students by innovating and thinking creatively, should be applauded. Edogawa University's drive to differentiate itself will result in competent communicators which are an asset to the workforce. Therefore programmes like this are of great value to the employment opportunities of its current and future students. I believe it is this "big picture" approach which will really distinguish Edogawa University from its peers and it is my hope that Edogawa students are known for their ability to communicate successfully in English in the future.